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Dysfunction at USA Gymnastics

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - DYSFUNCTION AT USA GYMNASTICS
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Among all of the dysfunctional organizations in contemporary Sportsworld, USA Gymnastics (USAG) seems to be the leader. The Larry Nassar abuse case peeled back the veneer of success and revealed an ugliness unmatched in recent memory. Nassar's offenses are now well-known and his conviction and sentencing produced high courtroom drama. More than 150 women offered testimony at Nassar's trial, most of whom were speaking about this abuse for the first time. Nassar was employed by the USAG for twenty years.

Nassar worked for Michigan State University, for USAG, and at the Karolyi Ranch in Texas where some of the sexual abuse occurred. For those who have read Joan Ryan's excellent book, *Pretty Girls in Little Boxes*, the surfacing of the Karolyi name in this context is no surprise.

Bela and Marta Karolyi came to prominence while leading the Romanian gymnastics team to Olympic gold in Montreal in 1976. Their training methods were seen as highly successful, and the Karolyis were sought after across the world of gymnastics. The Karolyis defected from Romania in 1981 and, in short order, they moved to Houston, where they opened a training facility and, subsequently, opened the Karolyi Ranch north of Houston. Bela and Marta Karolyi trained countless numbers of Olympic gold medalists for the United States and, although controversial, Bela emerged as a major figure in gymnastics in the United States.

It was at the ranch that Larry Nassar carried out his predatory actions on young gymnasts, first sheltering them from some of the harsh methods in Karolyi's training regimen and earning their trust. Thus Nassar was able to move freely in this atmosphere of physical and psychological abuse, and sexual abuse became an unchecked part of the scene.

When things began to unravel in 2015, the USAG seemed unable to respond to the crisis, adding layer after layer of incompetence to their resume. The organization has clearly proven unable to police itself and protect gymnasts from abuse. Given the success of the Karolyi trained gymnasts at international competitions,

USA Gymnastics was not interested in the complaints about Bela Karolyi's abusive training practices.

When Steve Penney, then the President of the USAG, first heard the allegations against Nasser, he decided to do an internal investigation before notifying the FBI. Five weeks elapsed before Penny contacted the FBI. Penny resigned his position in March of 2017. Subsequently, Penny has been arrested and charged with evidence tampering for ordering the removal of documents from the national training center.

The missing documents turned up last week at USAG headquarters in Indianapolis, prompting the U.S. Olympic Committee to announce that it was taking control of the USAG and would begin the process for decertification of the organization.

Following Penny's resignation, USAG added to their own troubles. In late August the body appointed Mary Lee Tracy as elite development coordinator. The only problem was that Tracy had ignored complaints of at least 50 gymnasts concerning Larry Nassar. Three days later, Nassar was indicted on child pornography charges. Tracy was quoted as saying she found him "amazing." She later qualified the statement.

Almost immediately complaints were lodged by gymnasts and others, leading USAG to dismiss Tracy. To replace Tracy on an interim basis they turned to U.S. Congressman and former gymnast, Mary Bono. Again, this provoked criticism from those who pointed out that Bono had worked for the law firm that advised USAG during the Nassar scandal and was accused of being part of the cover up. In addition, Simone Biles objected to Bono's public criticism of Nike's use of Colin Kaepernick in its latest advertising campaign. Bono resigned under pressure five days later.

Kerry Perry had been hired in December of 2017 to replace Steve Penny as President of USAG. Perry lasted only nine months on the job as she was fired following her hiring and then firing of Mary Lee Tracy. Perry had a sports marketing background and was seen as someone ill equipped for the job.

The most recent head to roll at USAG was that of Ron Gilmore, chief operating officer, who has spent the last 24 years at USAG. There had been considerable criticism of USAG for allowing Gilmore to continue as chief operating officer following the

revelations of Nasser's abuse and what some perceived as Gilmore's negligence in the handling of the Nasser case. Now he too is gone.

Since the first Nasser revelations, there have been several other departures from USA Gymnastics and affiliated entities. Debra Van Horn, a sports medicine trainer who worked with Nasser, was indicted on a charge of sexual assault on a child. Marvin Sharp, the USAG's Coach of the Year in 2010, was arrested for child molestation and sexual misconduct. Sharp committed suicide while in jail.

Certainly, one could reasonably argue that USA Gymnastics failed in its responsibilities. A number of former and current gymnasts, many of whom were victims of Larry Nasser, have argued that leadership at USAG made one bad decision after another. Perhaps, they say, USAG should have consulted the gymnasts rather than simply making claims that they were working to protect the athletes.

With all that has happened, it seems remarkable that only after the missing documents were found, that the USOC decided that something was amiss at USA Gymnastics and moved to suspend the organization. Many have little faith in the abilities of the USOC to effect change, and, furthermore, the process of decertification of USA Gymnastics will take at least a year.

Rachael Denhollander, a lawyer and a former gymnast who was the first person to publicly accuse Nasser of assault, recently told the *New York Times*, "Larry was just a symptom of the real problem at U.S.A.G. because it fostered an abusive culture for decades."

Indeed!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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